

Legendary Takoma Park Mayor Dies

12/18/90

By Jo-Ann Armao
Washington Post Staff Writer

Sammie A. Abbott, the former Takoma Park mayor whose indignant style of politics made him a folk hero in the town he helped transform, died during the weekend at his home. He was 82.

Abbott's tenure as Takoma Park mayor, from 1980 to 1985, capped a lifetime of activism for such causes as civil rights, disarmament and the plight of the poor. He died of myelodysplasia anemia Saturday night at his home.

Abbott—a freelance commercial artist who had been a labor organizer, apprentice bricklayer and World War II Bronze Star medalist—was a colorful man of controversy as well as conscience.

He stood in front of bulldozers to stop construction of a freeway he feared would destroy neighborhoods. He was hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee for his involvement in the peace movement and civil rights, and ended up being fired from his commercial art job. By his own account, he was arrested about 40 times, the last in 1988 when protesting the eviction of renters in Takoma Park.

Strident, confrontational, acerbic, cantankerous, even abusive—all were words used to describe him, and it was partly because of those traits that he was voted out as Takoma Park mayor in 1985. Abbott—a little man, bald save for a wisp of white hair—in many respects helped transform Takoma Park, taking a somewhat seedy sub-



SAMMIE A. ABBOTT
... "I'm a perpetually mad person"

urban enclave and imprinting it with his own committed philosophy. It was during his tenure that the community of about 16,000 declared itself a nuclear-free zone and prohibited the city from doing business with companies involved in producing nuclear weapons.

Abbott urged that the city become a sanctuary for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, and he traveled to Japan to observe the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Under him, the city, which had been known as "Tacky Park," acquired the nickname of the "People's Republic of Takoma."

His loss in 1985 by seven votes to a young lawyer who promised to spend more time with the day-to-day problems of city life was seen as a sign that the city itself had changed. Young professionals, attracted by stately Victorian homes, had moved in, and their politics became less philosophical and more pragmatic.

"Regrets? Hell no," Abbott said in the aftermath of his defeat. "It doesn't bother me at all that I don't have a suburban decorum."

See ABBOTT, C9, Col. 2

Sammie Abbott Dies at 82

ABBOTT, From C1

It was after another defeat—his unsuccessful campaign for mayor in 1978—that Abbott perhaps best expressed his approach to life:

"I'm a perpetually mad person. I hate injustice. As far as I'm concerned, I'm living to fight injustice. I'm living to fight the goddamned thing. I'm too mad to sleep."

"He was the last of the colorful politicians in Montgomery County," said Edmond F. Rovner, longtime Democratic activist.

Abbott's life was a series of battles. Grandson of Arab Christian immigrants who fled Turkish persecution in Syria, he was raised in Ithaca, N.Y., in what he recalled as a close-knit family.

The Depression radicalized him. He left Cornell University, where he was six credit hours short of a degree in architecture and the arts, to organize farmers and the unemployed. He supported himself by painting watercolors, for which he got \$10 and his agent \$3.

His organizing work may have cost his father his home and grocery store. The local bank, whom Abbott said was angry at his activism, foreclosed when his father couldn't meet payments on a \$6,000 loan.

In 1940, he moved to Washington to work in construction, where he helped organize laborers and hod carriers. Aided by his father-in-law, a bricklayer, he built a home in Takoma Park, rather than in then-disenfranchised Washington, so that he could vote.

After Pearl Harbor, he tried to



Abbott leads a Takoma Park group in a protest at the South African Embassy. 1964 PHOTO

enlist in the Marines but was rejected because of his eyesight. He ended up in the Air Force, where he was a staff sergeant in intelligence in a fighter squadron.

After the war, he was the area coordinator for the Bertrand Russell peace petition, which asked the United States to pledge not to use atomic weapons again. That, plus his work fighting for desegregation, caused him to be followed and investigated by the police and FBI.

When he was brought before Congress to testify about his activities, he was fired from his job and blacklisted for more than two years before he started a freelance career in commercial art.

The 1960s and early '70s saw him fighting against efforts to build freeways that would have carved up neighborhoods. Using such slogans as "No white men's roads through black men's homes," the Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis blocked construction of the North Central Freeway.

"When people fly into Washington, they marvel at how pretty it is. Well, it wouldn't look that way if not

for Sammie Abbott," said Angela Rooney, who worked with him on the committee.

Rooney and others hailed Abbott as being ahead of his time on all the important issues of the day, whether peace or civil rights or the environment.

"He did a lot of things he didn't have to," said his daughter, Nancy Abbott Young, a Los Angeles writer.

His three terms as mayor saw institution of rent control, installation of speed bumps and four-way stops to slow traffic and the blocking of school closings.

In addition to his wife, Ruth, who lives in Takoma Park, and his daughter, he is survived by a son, A. George Abbott, a physician from Modesto, Calif.; another daughter, Susan Abbott Arisman, an artist in Takoma Park; and four grandchildren. Also surviving are five sisters and brothers: Helen, Amelia and Robert Abbott of Florida and David M. and George Abbott of New York. A public memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. Jan. 5 in the Washington Ethical Society, 7750 16th St. NW.